DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 351 TM 006 748

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TITLE The Decline in Academic Standards.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 18p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; *Academic Standards; Admission Criteria; Affective Objectives; *Basic Skills; Cognitive Objectives; Conventional Instruction; Educational Quality; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Employment Qualifications; Expenditure Per Student; *Failure Factors; Higher Education; High School Graduates; *Instructional Innovation; *Public Opinion; Student Teacher Ratio
IDENTIFIERS Grade Inflation; Test Score Decline

ABSTRACT

Reports from the popular media indicate that the public is demanding a return to the teaching of basic skills, instead of supporting educational innovations which emphasize affective rather than cognitive objectives. Concerned with declining academic achievement at all levels of education and with the inadequate job skills of high school graduates, the public is now questioning preferential college admission and relaxed standards for curriculum, instruction, grading, and student promotion. Various studies have discredited the idea that educational innovations are related to higher achievement. Furthermore, no relationship has been found between academic achievement and per pupil expenditures. The author recommends that educational theorists recognize the public's strong and repeated demand, and that they question their own commitment to the expensive innovative programs which have mushroomed during the last decade or two. More rigorous academic standards may result in fewer academically successful students. However, the author suggests that the low achieving students may find rewarding careers in nonacademic fields. (CP)

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THE DECLINE IN ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The continual decline of academic standards has caused great concern on almost all levels of education, and, as a result, more and more thought is being centered on what goes on in the classroom. After almost two decades of support for more innovative teaching formats, it now appears that the most innovative methods may be a return to the basics, and, to a substantial degree, to more traditional education. For more than two years now the media and the public itself are demanding more substantive and cognitive forms of teaching. Continued reliance on many of the newer innovative approaches in teaching, which had promised so much but, apparently, have delivered so little, is fast diminishing. Myriad reports throughout the national press that hundreds of thousands of high school graduates can neither read, write nor compute at even a seventh grade level of achievement have only too clearly indicated that much so-called "innovative" teaching may have a deliterious effect on learning.

While the public is demanding more basic and traditional education, most of the professional education books and journals, as can easily be ascertained by a brief examination, still insist on the same and even more innovative shibboleths, now

so often discredited. They continue to call for more affective than for cognitive learning; for individualized instruction, teaching machines, open classrooms, team teaching, non-punitive grading, completely objective testing formats, interdisciplinary teaching, and many more--the list is almost endless.

It is true that the curricular and teaching methods should change as time passes, as do all areas of human endeavor. Yet change should be gradual, a natural evolution. Instead, overzealous educators have for almost a generation now been employing their new theories and ideas that supposedly have been confirmed by educational and psychological "research"; such research has claimed to prove that many of these radically innovative teaching techniques would produce a better educated and more "well-rounded" and enthusiastic student body. Yet the opposite situation appears to have occurred.

For each of the last fourteen years the scores on national scholastic aptitude and achievement tests have been declining--during the very period when "innovation" has been most widely employed. Arguments that blamed the decline on lower socio-economic populations with less family support, not enough money for education, a changing world, the Vietnamese War, Watergate, and even a more permissive society are not enough to explain this major deterioration. Indeed, it is entirely

possible that the more permissive society has, to a substantial degree, evolved from a more permissive education, which the radical innovators may have foisted upon our educational institutions.

In recent years President John Silber of Boston University has been critical of "the flight from excellence" which has taken place in the nation's schools and colleges. He maintains that "high schools that can't graduate students able to pass 12th grade competency tests should be shut down, saving the taxpayers money."[1] While Silber's demand appears unreasonably severe, many others in authority, and just plain citizens, would hope that at least an eighth grade level of achievement would become mandatory before an accredited secondary school were to grant a high school diploma. Unfortunately, even this more modest level has often not been required. Silber maintains that lowering standards for women and for minorities in order that they may be admitted to the more selective colleges and professional schools threatens all students, since their ability to develop is largely dependent on established goals. Says Silber:

> Calls for the maintenance of standards often are denounced as racist and sexist, but only a sexist or racist could believe that women or members of minorities are in fact inferior to white males and not able to compete with them on an equal basis.[2]

As already noted, the decline in scores on college board exams during each of the past fourteen years is a real threat to American education. A special investigative panel headed by

former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz has found that test scores are largely the result of changes in American society and values. It further points out that learning standards in schools and colleges are down, partially the result of growing absenteeism, grade inflation and easier textbooks.[3]

The Wirtz report, financially supported by the College Entrance Examination Board of Princeton, New Jersey, further finds that easier access to colleges, along with a growing lack of motivation and reduced seriousness may have resulted in less preparation by students for college entrance examinations. Says the Wirtz report:

> Absenteeism, formerly considered intolerable, is now condoned. An 'A' or 'B' means a good deal less than it used to . Promotion from one grade to another has become almost automatic. Homework apparently has been cut about in half. Open-admissions colleges are available; if entering students don't know how to read and write and do arithmetic, 'remediation' is available.[4]

With the above information from authoritative sources, the plight of educational standards in the schools and colleges appears grim indeed. Another major reason for this situation, already briefly noted, has been the overabundant use of innovative teaching formats, which have promised so much but have delivered so little to the improvement of education. Academic achievement scores in the Chicago public school system have become so low in recent months that the Chicago Board of Public Instruction has announced that from now on elementary students will no longer be assigned specific grade levels. Until a

student can demonstrate the proficiency of the average American seventh grader, he or she will not be allowed to graduate from grammar school.[5]

Many of the educational innovations of the past two decades, as noted above, have not been working as well as earlier more basic methods. This fact is reported by two federally financed studies of nearly 40,000 students over the past three years. These studies even find that children in traditional classrooms apparently get greater self-esteem than those taught by other methods.[6] Yet the radical innovators have always claimed that an improved self-image was a major reason for implementing their programs! Says yet another study, this time by the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto, California:

> [students] enrolled in programs with a more moderate emphasis on innovation and individualization showed the greatest improvement on reading and mathematics tests.[7]

Studies such as the above have repeatedly validated the fact that excessive "innovation" in the instructional process, far from improving instruction, has often made it worse. The media and the public itself constantly demand more basic and substantive teaching; yet they are too often resisted by educational theorists who continue to write in their professional journals concerning newer nostrums or formats which will perform wonders. Yet one professional educator who seems to be on the right track is Robert L. Ebel of Michigan State University. He explains

that too often educators have argued that teachers today are no longer expected merely to provide children with basic skills and information; that they are also expected to help to solve our racial problems and to serve as the coordinator for community action. Says Ebel: "in that array of concerns and activities, cognitive competence appears to stand in the wings rather than on center stage."[8]

Ebel points out that it is not the citizenry who ask for greater involvement of the schools in programs of social action. Rather, he says it is they, the general public, that has been dismayed "at the neglect of cognitive competence that inevitably accompanies preoccupation with all these activities." Ebel maintains that the schools are not the proper agency for solving complex problems of society and opts for substantial amounts of basic learning and basic skills instead.[9]

The serious decline in academic achievement levels of high school graduates has affected the nation in still other ways. The press constantly reports employers' complaints that many of these newly hired graduates are unable to function on jobs at acceptable levels--mainly due to their lack of writing, reading, and computational skills; and, further, that they are so often deficient substantively in general education that they cannot be prepared for mid-management and higher positions.

The United States Navy itself is having a serious problem of integrating high school graduates into its routine activities because of the latters' inability to read and write at acceptable levels. Says the Navy:

> ...many of the nation's high schools are producing graduates who are functionally illiterate. A new Navy report indicates that 70 percent of the 12,000 recruits who dropped out of boot camp last year could not even read the basic Blue Jacket's Manual, although most of them owned a high school diploma.[10]

The Navy has had to spend $5 million rewriting its manuals, which had been at an eleventh grade comprehension level. Now the new versions have bigger type, wider margins and shorter words. It has even had to establish remedial reading programs; any recruit whose reading ability falls below fourth grade level is discharged.[11]

Indeed, the problem has become so severe that Eric Severeid gave his entire speaking time on the CBS Walter Cronkite television news program one evening recently to this very topic. He was extremely critical of the fact that schools, in attempting to accommodate underprepared and unwilling students, have allowed academic standards to deteriorate to highly unacceptable levels during the past decade.[12]

It is common knowledge that the constantly recurring problem of "keeping discipline in the classroom" at the secondary school level has had a deliterious effect on academic achievement levels. No matter what "psychologically proven methods" employed

in the classroom, the discipline problem will not disappear until laws are passed and enforced which prevent extremely disruptive and uncooperative students from attending high school. High school graduation and college admission may not always be the best path for many young people. Apprenticeship programs of many kinds might be more suitable for some; there are, undoubtedly, more job openings in certain career-vocational programs than for less than mediocre college graduates today.

Frank E. Armbruster in an article in The New York Times Magazine makes a strong case for the concept that "the more we spend, the less children learn." He points out that in 1976 the United States spent $75 billion on education, more than four times the 1960 expenditure. But Armbruster says that all that money has not bought much, explaining that student academic achievement levels are now far below those of the earlier period.[13] Says Armbruster:

> The data showed that average achievement scores for all grades above third or fourth not only fell, but fell simultaneously, and each year the school children dropped further and further behind the old achievement norms as they progressed through the grades. In certain cases scores were so low that they may have reached the theoretical lower limit for multiple-choice tests.[14]

Armbruster, like other writers today, puts much of the blame for this disastrous situation on educational innovators, who are too often concerned about a student's psyche and not enough about his education. He explains that the decline in

academic performance is of great concern to parents, "who are often dismayed to find teachers in league with children in resisting their demands for more effort in their studies, especially homework."[15] The Los Angeles Times has reported that some teachers say that they have abandoned requiring much outside work from students because students simply won't do it; thus they have "caved in to the pressure."[16]

This situation is a most serious one for American education. A conscientious instructor today too often finds that he has difficulty upholding standards in schools and even in many colleges for a number of reasons. Many institutions are mainly interested in increasing enrollments rather than in making sure that students are required to achieve academically. Some instructors are more interested in increasing their class sizes by becoming popular among their students; standards and learning here are of minor consequence. They substitute frequent and ever constant showing of films and allowing "rap sessions" for substantive information and learning of skills. This approach, which may not teach students much in a discipline, is often not only highly popular with students; it also requires little rigorous effort from them. Grades are inflated rather than reflecting true achievement. Everyone, students, instructors and administration are happy; yet the students may have learned only the most elementary and peripheral kind of information. This "system" is extremely difficult for the serious teacher to combat; thus he too is sometimes

inclined to join the system.

Dr. Bernard D. Davis of the Harvard Medical School has had a difficult time of maintaining standards--even at this prestigious institution of learning. He points out that "in their eagerness to help disadvantaged students, some medical schools are handing out diplomas to people who may not be qualified as doctors."[16] Dr. Davis insists that he supports preferential admissions for disadvantaged students, but he disagrees with faculty members who are "succumbing to temptation to award ... diplomas on a charitable basis."[17] Some of Davis' colleagues agree, maintaining that special admissions students have so far simply not done as well as their classmates on the state licensing exams. In California, for example, the first-time failure rate for law students taking the bar exam between 1970 and 1973 was 30 percent; among minority students, 61 percent.[18] In any event, this situation is a serious one and should be addressed forthrightly so that professional schools' standards do not join the toboggan slide that is so evident at other levels of education.

Nancy Tuttle, a reading teacher in the Durham high school system (N.C.), says that she is "shocked and saddened" to see so many young people, both black and white, who cannot read, but continue to be promoted to the next grade. She criticizes a system which thinks it makes teachers and administrators look as if they fail too many. Ms. Tuttle maintains that young people

in high school, realize that they will pass whether or not they attend regularly and achieve academically; therefore, they make little effort to do either.[19]

For Tuttle the solution for this problem is to stop using "socio-economic class status" as an excuse for a student's failure to perform acceptably in school. Also, she maintains that the Board of Education should insist that any student who does not achieve at certain minimum standards should not be allowed to pass into the next grade. For her, this plan would be the greatest motivating force to keep children in class and learning. She would also support more severe disciplinary alternatives than simply to suspend students for a few days, as is the usual practice at present. Instead, she would have an "in-house suspension with conduct and achievement criteria closely supervised by trained counsellors."[20] Further, she urges that parents and others sit in classes to find out for themselves why and the extent to which students make little effort to perform properly. Then people would better understand why attendance, dropouts and illiteracy are such problems.

Too often educators claim that a shortage of funding is the major reason for the failure of schools and colleges to live up to their promises. Examination of the data throughout the recent period of academic decline shows that there has not been a positive correlation between spending trends and academic

achievement; nor has there been one between lower student-teacher ratios and higher student achievement.[21] Says Armbruster:

> In fact, since the mid-1960's nationally, the reverse has generally been true; as student/teacher ratios dropped, achievement dropped, too. There was also no relation between academic achievement and the age of school buildings, or even money spent per pupil .... West Virginia, for example, did not experience a significant decline, though it spends less than California and less than half of what New York spends per pupil.[22]

The above argument appears to be a strong one; the nation cannot materially increase its expenditures in education each year during the present period of recession, especially when such expenditures in the past have done little to improve the quality of education.

But Armbruster uses his strongest barbs against the curriculum and instructional innovators who have so long criticized even limited types of "rote learning." He points out that pupils a generation ago who couldn't read by the seventh grade were virtually unknown. He adds that now the same system that had taught the fundamentals to the children of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, where up to 75 percent of the adult populations could not read or write in their own languages, is not able to do the same for children of native-born Americans, all of whom spoke English and most of whom were at least literate.[23] Armbruster supports some traditional teaching methods, especially in the lower grades, whereby teachers helped children after school, sent some to summer school or even kept them back for a year or two. This

approach, he claims, would probably drastically increase achievement levels in the upper grades and in high school. Armbruster claims that it is no crime to keep a child back "until the light goes on"; that it is no favor to the child" to push him through and out of school without the basic skills."[24]

In conclusion, the public's strong and repeated demand for more basic and less affective and innovative teaching must be faced by the educational establishment. If this means discarding a substantial amount of innovative curricular and instructional formats, that have mushroomed at great expense during the past decade or two, so be it. Graduating students must be educated and trained for a real world, where vital knowledge and skills will be needed, and where competition will always be present. While many educators might hope for a more "caring-sharing" world, it appears that such a dream will not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. Although it may be true that under a more rigorous system of education not everyone will succeed academically, unsuccessful students still have myriad career opportunities which, while not perhaps equal on a socio-economic level to a professional career in some instances, still offers reasonably good opportunities for worthwhile careers and lives. The manual trades, semi-skilled and skilled work, and even certain areas in salesmanship might fall into such a category. Indeed, these types of jobs are frequently more available than others of a possibly higher "status."

Until we recognize the problem as described above, we will continue to face declining academic achievement levels and a general deterioration in the academic process, something that can only reduce the welfare of the American people and the strength of the nation as a whole.

FOOTNOTES

1. "College Standards Backed," The Florida Times-Union, Jacksonville, May 2, 1977, p. 6B.
2. Ibid.
3. "SAT Decline Tied to Dip in Standards," The Miami Herald, August 24, 1977, p. 5.
4. Ibid.
5. "Chicago's Tougher Basic Training," Newsweek, August 14, 1977, p. 44.
6. "Why Student Test Scores Are Down," U.S. News and World Report, September 5, 1977, p. 55.
7. "Basics Are Better," U.S. News and World Report, July 25, 1977, p. 75.
8. Robert L. Ebel, "Declining Scores, A Conservative Explanation," Phi Delta Kappan, December, 1976, p. 308.
9. Ibid.
10. "Navy Blues," Newsweek, September 5, 1977, pp. 55-56.
11. Ibid.
12. "Eric Severeid's Notebook, CBS Evening News," Walter Cronkite Show, Columbia Broadcasting Company, September 1, 1977.
13. Frank E. Armbruster, "The More We Spend the Less Children Learn," The New York Times Magazine, August 28, 1977, pp. 9-11.
14. Ibid., p. 56.
15. Ibid.
16. "Minority Report Card," Newsweek, July 12, 1976, p. 74.
17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Nancy Tuttle, "We Can't Keep Passing Pupils Who Can't Read," Durham Morning Herald, June 20, 1977, p. 4.

20. Ibid.

21. Frank E. Armbruster, "The More We Spend The Less Children Learn," The New York Times Magazine, August 28, 1977, pp. 53-54.

22. Ibid., pp. 55, 60.

23. Ibid., pp. 55, 60.

24. Ibid., pp. 55, 60.

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